TRUTH
November 15, 2009

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Psalm 119:1–8, 41–48
John 18:33–38

"What is truth?"
John 18:38 (NRSV)

God's providence has brought us
to this time and this place—
as Christians in a multifaith world.
Perhaps the continuing vitality of
many of the world religions is part of
God's way of relating to and caring for
all of God's human community.
Perhaps this is our time as Christians
to learn how to be Christians
and, at the same time, to be
neighbors with those of other faiths.

Cynthia Campbell
A Multitude of Blessings

Lord of the universe, creator of us all,
we come this morning, grateful for your creation,
its glorious diversity of color, language,
culture, and religion. We come in gratitude
for the promise that you love what you have
and that it is good—all of it, very good.
So as we worship this morning,
open us to that startling word
of grace and hope:
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

It was a fascinating group at the dinner table: four of us, American Presbyterians. Our guests were Esther Moscona, from Mexico, Jewish, a psychologist, and Annabelle Po, an evangelical Christian, born of Chinese parents in the Philippines, with an MBA from Harvard, living in Hong Kong, a successful CEO of her own export-import business, mostly in China. The conversation took place in a hotel dining room in Moscow. After the customary introductory pleasantries, Annabelle, sitting directly across the table from me, said, "As soon as I discovered that you were a Christian minister, I hoped we'd have an opportunity to talk: I have a question." "Uh oh," I thought. This happens to clergy a lot, and it doesn't always

turn out well. On the other hand, maybe for tax purposes this had suddenly become a business trip. Just kidding!

Annabelle told me her story. Many weekends she joins a group from her Hong Kong evangelical church on a mission trip across the border in China. Their purpose is not to build houses or work in health clinics but to make converts. “We tell them about Jesus: they’re eager to hear after years of oppression, and many are converted on the spot. But,” she went on, “I have a question. In my business, mostly in China, I deal with people every day who don’t know Jesus. Some of them are Buddhists, some Shinto, some nothing. They’re good people, hard working, kind, generous, honest. But my church says they’re lost, damned; that these good people I respect so much are headed for eternal torment in hell. So my question is, is that right? Are they lost? I worry about it all the time.” It’s such a great question, and I didn’t want to brush it off. But a look from my traveling companion, who overheard and who knew I was working up to a lecture, her look said, “Keep it short. Give her the condensed version.” So that is what I did. “No, I don’t think it’s right. The God I believe in has made us all in his image and loves and cares for and will never stop loving us all. I don’t believe God ever loses anybody.” Being a good Harvard MBA, Annabelle persisted, returned to her question four or five more times, and each time I returned to basic Christian theology: a Creator God who loves every human being, and a God Jesus said was most like a parent, who no more than a human parent could utterly reject a child, neither will God. At the end of the long meal, she thanked me. “I never heard that before. I have more questions.” I invited her to correspond, and perhaps she will.

Annabelle’s question is “the” question, is it not? Is our religion the only true religion? Is our way the only way? Is God’s purpose to see that all human beings become Christian? When a Muslim, a Jew, a Buddhist offers a prayer of gratitude or cries out for help or petitions on behalf of a child, a sick beloved, does anyone hear?

The question used to be abstract. For most of our first 200 years as a nation, the United States was Protestant Christian. But by the middle of the twentieth century, we had become a different nation.

Sociologist Will Herberg wrote an important book that everybody was reading: *Protestant, Catholic, Jew,* which argued that the old Protestant paradigm had become diverse. We were no longer exclusively Protestant, but Catholic and Jewish as well.

Since then our nation has become even much more profoundly diverse religiously. I had Jewish friends, but I never met a Muslim until I went to graduate school. Today there are more Muslims in America than Presbyterians and Episcopalians combined. Modern scholars of culture and religion, like Harvard’s Diana Eck, document the almost dizzying phenomenon of American religious diversity, unlike anything the world has ever seen.

But since the events of September 11, 2001, we have been aware not only of our religious diversity, but also religious stereotyping and prejudice and the need for understanding.

When the name of the U.S. Army major who is accused of shooting and killing thirteen people at Ft. Hood last week was revealed—Nidal Malik Hasan—the *Guardian* reported, “The blogosphere and message boards lit up all over the country, with the predictable assortment of bigotry and vilification of Islam and questioning the loyalty of American Muslims.”

Pat Robertson said Islam isn’t a religion at all but a political system bent on overthrowing governments.

Michele Malkin called Hasan the “Fort Hood Jihadist.”

Jonah Goldberg wrote in the *Tribune* last Friday that there is a powerful case to be made that Islamic extremism is not some fringe phenomenon but part of mainstream Islamic life around the world.

Not to be outdone, Rush Limbaugh announced that the shootings were President Obama’s fault.

So some truth is in order here. There are 3,500 self-identified Muslims in the U.S. armed forces according to the U.S. Department of Defense and in reality many more. There are Muslim military chaplains and Muslim heroes such as Kareem Rashad Sultan Kahn, who earned a Purple Heart and Bronze Star in Iraq.

The accusation is often made that Islam is essentially a violent religion. And there are passages of the Koran, Islam’s sacred text, that are violent. The same may be said about Jewish and Christian scriptures. I’m grateful that my religion is not defined by Psalm 137—one of the loveliest, most poignant psalms for seven verses and then, addressing the hated Babylonians, taking a nasty turn: “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock.”

I’m grateful that the God in whom I believe and to whom I am devoted is not defined by Leviticus 26, where God, addressing disobedient Israel, says, “I will bring terror upon you. . . I will let loose wild animals against you. . . . I will heap your carcasses on the carcasses of your idols”

I’m grateful that my religion, my God and my morality, are not described by the fifteenth chapter of 1 Samuel, in which God tells Samuel to tell King Saul to attack the Amalekites, “and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”

Selective reading of sacred texts can be, and often is, misleading and distorting. And just as we do not wish to be defined by the violent texts in the Bible, neither do Muslims wish to be defined by violent texts in the Koran.

Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, a leading Jordanian intellectual and devout Muslim, was commissioned to study and work toward peaceful coexistence and interfaith cooperation among Jews, Muslims, and Christians, which, to a great degree, happens in Jordan. Jordan has suffered from Islamic extremism, too: suicide bombings of three prominent hotels in Amman that killed 57 and wounded 112, mostly Jordanian.

The prince gathered twelve leading Islamic scholars, who wrote the "Amman Message" last year, the purpose of which was to "recover Islam's unity around core principles," including that the Koran honors every human being, without distinctions of color, race, or religion; that Muslims are called to act gently on earth, to shun violence and cruelty and speak with kindness and respect. The Message "urges tolerance and forgiveness and opposes extremism, exaggeration and intransigence."

The Message says, "We denounce extremism today, just as our forefathers did throughout Islamic history. On religious grounds, on moral grounds, we denounce the contemporary concept of terrorism—including assaults on peaceful civilians."

The National Conference of Bishops or National Council of Churches couldn't have said it better. Which brings us around to the question of truth: What is it? Who has it? Does anybody have all of it?

The late Shirley Guthrie, a much-loved Presbyterian theologian, has written eloquently about it, as has our own Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary and Professor of Theology, in her fine book *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity*.

Cynthia Campbell points out that when it comes to truth claims, Christians have plenty of problems internally. It wasn't that long ago that Protestant denominations considered one another barely and perhaps not even Christian. The Vatican isn't sure Protestant churches are real churches, and we return the compliment. Some Lutherans won't break bread with other Lutherans, not to mention Presbyterians. So we Christians have not exactly been a model of openness and graciousness when it comes to truth.

Cynthia and Guthrie both suggest that we read carefully familiar passages that seem to claim Christian exclusivity, read them in context, in history, and, most importantly, in light of the whole testimony of scriptures. "I am the way, the truthm and the life," Jesus said. "No one comes to the Father, but by me." Guthrie asks, Who is this Jesus? Who is the way and the truth? This Jesus is one who seemed to accept everyone, particularly those regarded as unacceptable by religion. He is one who reached across all the barriers of culture and race and religion and invited all to sit down together at the banquet table.

Both Guthrie and Campbell urge us to read Christian exclusive texts in light of other, more inclusive ones: God's universal love for the creation and all its creatures; Jesus Christ as God's purpose to reclaim and redeem all of creation, whether people use the proper nomenclature and say the same creeds or not.

The God of our tradition, like the God worshiped by Jews and Muslims, is a mystery that transcends all human attempts to define and pin down and limit. God will not be confined by human words, creeds, institutions.

Professor Guthrie wrote, "We do not have to 'take' Christ to people of other religious traditions: we go to meet him in our encounters with them. We will expect and gladly welcome evidence that the grace and truth we have come to know in him has reached into their lives as well. We will be glad to hear them say things about their God and their faith that sound remarkably similar to what we say about our God and our faith" (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, 11 February 2002).

On the last day of his earthly life, Jesus stood before a Roman provincial governor, Pontius Pilate, for questioning. "I came into the world to testify to the truth," Jesus said.

Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

What is truth? Jesus didn't answer the question. He could have said, God, the Holy One of Israel, is the Truth. The Ten Commandments are the Truth. Jesus could have launched into a philosophic defense of monotheism in contrast to Roman polytheism. His silence at that critical moment is not a lost opportunity. It is a very significant silence, a modest silence in the face of the most important question any one of us—Pontius Pilate, you and I—ever asks; a holy, reverent silence.

Professor Guthrie wrote, "The truth we seek in interreligious dialogue is not our truth but God's truth. It is truth that exposes, judges, and corrects the limitations and fallibility of us Christians and our religion as well as those of other people and their religion."

It is not our truth, but God's, and every human being, regardless of who we are, where we were born, who our parents or grandparents were and what they believed—every human being seeks truth, longs for truth.

Christians believe that truth is not an idea in the mind, a philosophy or theology; it is not a creed, a liturgy, a book or a church.

Christians believe truth is a man. Jesus was his name. He was, we believe, the perfect expression of the mystery and reality of God, and he taught that every human being is beloved of God, the object of God's mercy and

generosity and grace; every human being—Muslim, Jew, Christian—is created in God’s image and loved with an everlasting love.

And when he, whom we regard as Truth with a capital “T” was asked, What is, finally, the essence of it all? What does the God and Creator of us all finally want of us? he said, simply, “Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Amen.